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Why everything you know about protein is wrong

Bars, bagels, sparkling water, spread: protein is everywhere, but not as you know it. What was once considered a staple component of chicken, fish and eggs has become the healthy-eating marketer's Holy Grail. From bags of nuts to sacks of potatoes, run of the mill groceries now come with a 'high protein' sticker - in spite of there being no change to the ingredients than before; others see additional amounts inserted artificially, into cereals, chocolate bars and breads, and ever-expanding ranges on supermarket shelves feature products from shakes to protein power balls specifically designed to pack in an extra hit. Log In New to ? Create an account With the promise of assisting weight loss and building muscle, our obsession to capitalise on this health 'saviour' food group means that consumption now far exceeds demand. The average adult needs 0.75g of protein daily per kilo they weigh; someone weighing 70kg, or 11st, should thus be eating 52.5g each day - equivalent to a large bowl of oats, three eggs and a chicken breast. Yet the current average rate of consumption in the UK among 19 to 64-year-olds each day is now 72g - some 39pc more than a 70kg person needs.

Alongside fat and carbohydrates, protein is one of the three macronutrients our bodies require in relatively large amounts. It is "vital to the crucial and ongoing building, strengthening and repairing of muscle, bone, skin, hair and major organs, as well as being an essential component of enzymes, hormones and antibodies," explains James Collins, a sports nutritionist and author of *The Energy Plan*.

Proteins are amino acids, many of which are produced naturally by the body, but nine essential ones are not, and so must be taken from food.

Of those, there are complete proteins - things like meat and fish, cheese and quinoa - and incomplete ones - like nuts and pulses, which require being combined (i.e. baked beans on wholegrain toast) in order for the full benefits to be realised.

But our appetite for the stuff has now skyrocketed.

And it's not just bodybuilders looking to bulk who have fallen for its charms: low carbohydrate diets such as keto and paleo, which largely consist of high fat, high protein foods, have also driven this new-found affection - as has its being popularised by bread and pasta-shunning celebrities and magazines.

People's "trust" in protein not causing weight gain is "a byproduct of the misconception that carbs make us fat," says dietitian Sophie Medlin. "It is really important to remember that carbs and protein have exactly the same amount of calories per gram (4kcal). This means they have the same impact on our energy intake."

When it comes to diets, misinformation - particularly the kind that can be lucrative for the companies behind it - is common, says David L. Katz, a doctor and author of *The Truth About Food*. Some of this is driven by sites such as Instagram, Medlin adds, which is "terrifying" - particularly for those younger and potentially more easily swayed - "when we look at the recent evidence that social media influencers dish out false nutrition claims 90pc of the time... Online nutrition is heavily polarised and tribal."

She suggests the creation of a specific verification symbol for registered healthcare professionals, who are legally accountable for the advice they give out online - a way of combatting the self-professed 'plant-based doctors' and 'low carb doctors' that have gained an enormous digital following. "In reality, a healthy, balanced diet contains all food groups in moderation. "Unfortunately, moderation is a message that doesn't sell books or gain headlines," Medlin says.

A protein overload can put added pressure on the kidneys, which are responsible for breaking down the excess - particularly damaging for those with pre-existing conditions. Studies show that eating lots of red meat and full-fat dairy, which diets like keto and paleo espouse, are associated with higher risk of health issues such as cancer and heart disease, while Finnish research found that men who ate an average of 109g of protein each day were 33pc more likely to have heart failure than those who ate 78g.

The notion that "the more you eat, the better" is a "critical fallacy" Katz explains, as people fail to realise that eating too much of anything - protein included - sees "those calories turn into body fat just the same as calories from any other source."



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For building muscle, it is more of a case of when - as opposed to how much - protein is consumed that can really make a difference. Collins says eating good sources of it within 24 hours of resistance training, such as lifting weights, has notable effects, while one study found that spreading protein doses throughout the day, rather than in one large meal, can serve our bodies best.

Our protein obsession remains "at odds with everything we know about health [and] everything we know about the planet," Katz adds.

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